

How to Use Stress to Your Advantage

By [Emily Holland](#)

Stress is usually characterized as an unpleasant and unwelcome feeling that expresses itself both physically and mentally. The effects of stress range from irritability and anxiety to raised blood pressure and heart disease. When you think of stress in these terms, it's no wonder you spend so much time trying to manage or avoid it altogether.

But what if, instead of stressing over how to rid your life of stress, you focused on ways to use it to your advantage? What would happen if you perceived stress as a helpful companion with benefits to offer rather than as an irritating foe out to make your life harder?

As Dr. Kelly McGonigal describes in her book [The Upside of Stress](#), it is this shift in mindset that allows you to have a healthier, even beneficial relationship with stress. Dr. McGonigal, a health psychologist, once shared the same stance a majority of health professionals have adopted: stress is bad and you need to eliminate it immediately before it affects your health. However, she discovered that perceiving stress through such a negative lens can actually be harmful to your health. On the other hand, when you view stress as a helpful tool and motivator, and learn how to harness it to your advantage, your health is less likely to be negatively affected. In fact, stress may actually be *good* for you if you learn to embrace it and use it properly.

Benefits of Stress

Often when you think of stress, the first thing to come to mind are its negative symptoms (i.e., panic, headache, tightening in the chest, etc.). But stress actually has an abundance of benefits to offer, such as:

Motivating Action

Stress can serve as a great motivator for reaching goals or accomplishing simple tasks. Whether it's landing a new job promotion, meeting a deadline, or tackling a to-do list, a little stress can push you to take action. If you didn't feel any stress at all, you might not feel inclined to break out of your comfort zone, which is essential for personal growth.

Building Resiliency

When you experience small amounts of stress, you are actually building up your resistance to future stressors. According to the [American Psychological Association](#), over time humans are wired to adapt to stressful situations by building resilience, which can be developed by:

- Making connections with others
- Taking care of yourself
- Taking decisive actions

Boosting Cognitive Function

[A 2013 study](#) from the University of California – Berkeley found that acute stress can generate new nerve cells in the brain, improving cognitive and mental performance. According to the authors of the study, a certain amount of stress can promote:

- Optimal levels of focus
- Improved memory
- Enhanced learning of new tasks

Using Stress to Your Advantage

If stress has its benefits, then how do you take advantage of them? How can you make stress work *for* you rather than against you?

Retrain Your Brain

As previously discussed, how you view stress can determine how it affects you. Retraining the brain to view stress as a helpful tool rather than a roadblock will take time as the latter has likely become deeply ingrained. While it will take some practice, it is possible to change your response when stress rears its head.

Replace the negative thoughts that typically arise at the first sign of stress with more positive ones, such as, *I'm experiencing stress and welcome it fully*. Then, think of how you could best use it to solve a problem or reach a goal. How can you make the stress work *for* you?

Tip: Don't stress over trying to think of a way to best use stress! This strategy will get easier over time. If you're unable to think of how to take advantage of whatever stressor you're facing, simply accept that it's there. Sit with it rather than flee from it.

Reframe Your Perspective

When you attach purpose to a difficult situation, it becomes easier to handle or, at the very least, motivates you to handle it. When you reframe stressors in order to add meaning to your life, you are giving your stress a positive purpose.

Perhaps its purpose is one of the above benefits discussed such as motivating behavior, building resilience, or boosting cognitive performance, or it could be something else entirely. Pairing

stress with a purpose will allow you to broaden your perspective as to why it exists and the benefits it provides.

Ask Why

Sometimes you feel stressed and can easily identify the cause; other times you're unsure where it stems from. Pinpointing the root cause of your stress puts you in a position to work with it rather than against it. When you feel the symptoms of stress, either physically or psychologically, but don't know what's brought it on, you may feel as though you aren't in control of what's happening. However, identifying its origins and approaching it within a more positive framework puts you back in the driver's seat.

Stress is a part of everyday life, and as much as you might try to will it away, it will inevitably creep up again. By making stress your ally, you can learn to use it to your advantage and perhaps even learn something new in the process. So next time you're feeling stressed, accept it as part of the journey and embrace it whole-heartedly. You might be surprised by the result.

Retrain your brain for health and happiness and discover a new perspective on the mind-body connection at *Journey Into Healing*, our signature four-day wellness workshop with Deepak Chopra. [Learn More.](#)

About the Author



Emily Holland

Certified Health Coach

Emily is a certified Health Coach and freelance writer with a focus on psychology, mental health, and optimal living. A combined interest in healthy living and human behavior led Emily to pursue a certification in health coaching at the Institute for Integrative Nutrition as well as a master's degree in General Psychology. Her personal struggle with anxiety motivated her to

research and implement a variety of holistic approaches into her lifestyle, such as changes in diet and the adoption of mindfulness meditation. She credits these lifestyle changes as well as many others with helping her better manage symptoms of anxiety and everyday stressors. She is most passionate about sharing what she has...[Read more](#)